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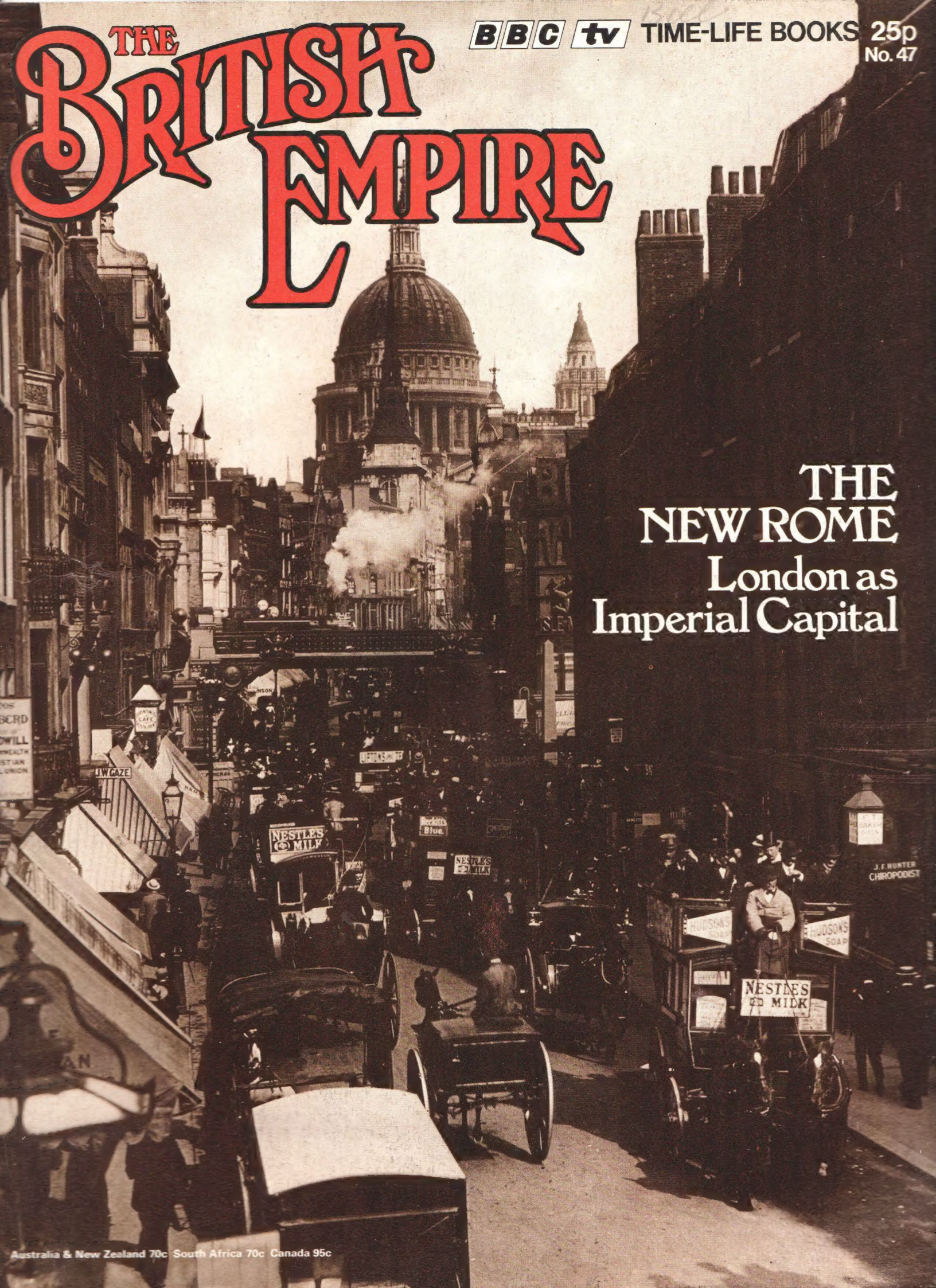
THE BRITISH EMPIRE



THE NEW ROME
London as Imperial Capital

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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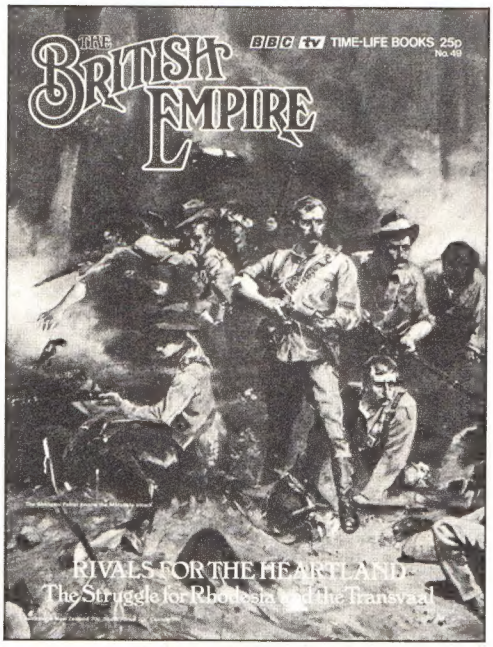

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Cover: A view down Fleet Street in 1897, with St. Paul's dominating the background and a train crossing the bridge at Ludgate Circus, captures the busy assurance of Victorian London.

THE NEW ROME
LONDON AS IMPERIAL CAPITAL

The Empire, so proudly embraced by Canada on this stamp, dwarfed the Mother Country at the imperial heart.

By the end of the 19th century, London was the capital of one quarter of the world. London had become the New Rome, centre of a world-wide Empire far greater than the Roman Empire. How could one city in one tiny island administer so immense an area? The answer was industry. The power of modern communications made the Empire effective. From far and near, steamships, telegraph cables, posts and railways converged on London, just as all the roads had led to Rome. But whereas the Roman Empire was at its greatest extent for 200 years, the British Empire remained so for nearer 20. At the climax of Empire, the end was already close and before long London would be, once again, an island capital ❧

by James Morris

The power-house of the British Empire was London, the Rome of the modern world. By the end of the 19th Century, London complacently felt itself to be, as the bards of the 1897 Jubilee called it, "the hub of the world." It really was the greatest of cities. With its contrasts of patrician glitter and fetid slum, its hugger-mugger mixture of pathos and parade, its humour, its boisterous and libidinous night-life, its glorious parks and its glowering smoke-filled skies; with the murky old Thames rolling grandly through its centre, and the millennium of history that flowed through its very soul; with all its quirks, splendours and disgraces, London possessed a universal, Shakespearian quality that every perceptive visitor remarked. Here were the shrines, symbols and mechanisms of the greatest empire ever known to history.

In the centre of the metropolis, loftily above St. James's Park, stood the headquarters of the whole imperial organization, built in Italian style by George Gilbert Scott 40 years before. The building had been the subject of a famous architectural controversy of the 1850s: Scott wanted to build it in the Gothic style, but Gothic had come to be identified with Toryism, and when the Whigs returned to power in 1857, Lord Palmerston insisted on Renaissance. The result was a not very inspired building – a heavy towered block, decorated with sculpted representations of imperial races, Indian rivers or dead Colonial Secretaries: but it housed both the Colonial Office and the India Office, beneath whose dual authority lived nearly 400 million people.

The Colonial Office administered a gallimaufry of overseas possessions, from infinitesimal tropic islands to unexplored immensities of Africa. It was run with gentlemanly assurance by a handful of civil servants. Club-like, secluded, aloof but traditionally humane, it was only now being rejuvenated with electric light and typewriters by the energetic new Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain. Nonetheless, it retained its dark mahogany and deep leather furnishings, smoky coal fires and high narrow corridors. It possessed a fireplace, taken from the waiting-room of its old premises in Whitehall, before which Nelson and Wellington had warmed themselves during the course of their only meeting.

At the India Office next door was stacked all the knowledge, experience and self-esteem acquired during two centuries of the British presence in India. India was, in fact, ruled from Calcutta, and its practical executive was the Viceroy. But the India Office, his link with the Imperial Government, was an *alter ego* of the Raj. All the departments of Indian Government had their microcosms there in Whitehall, and the Office had its own stores depot, audit office and accountant general. The men who ran the India Office were clever and dedicated careerists, and their methods were nothing if not deliberate – "stately, solemn, sure and slow," as Lord Curzon put it.

Everything about the India Office reflected Britain's ancient association with the East. The Office was old, sombre, powerful and legalistic. The reputation of the India Office was daunting: its authority over those romantic domains of the East was one of the decisive facts of the 19th Century.

Conveniently close were the offices of military power, the scaffolding of Empire. If one left the Colonial Office through the park, and strolled past the delectable pleasure-lake – where the pelicans gravely meditated upon their rocks, and the spanking little water-fowl bobbed beneath the suspension-bridge – up the Duke of York's Steps past the German Embassy, round the corner past the Athenaeum and the Travellers' Club: presently one would discover, opposite the Army and Navy Club on the south side of Pall Mall, the sprawling premises of the War Office.

Ponderous architecturally, the War Office was overweight professionally too, despite successive reforms in the latter half of the century. It was bureaucratic, catty and sluggish, with inner rings of collusion and complex social shibboleths. It was, nevertheless, alarmingly powerful in the world of the 1890s. It had a finger in the pie from Canada to Singapore, forts and barracks and military hospitals everywhere, 72,000 men in India, 23 battalions in Ireland, cavalry regiments in Egypt and South Africa, military prisons in Barbados and Ceylon, regiments whose scarlet jackets, kilts, bugle-calls and Maxim guns had struck a

bewildered terror into the hearts of enemies as variously formidable as the Zulus, the Egyptians and the half-breeds of Manitoba.

Walk up Whitehall, and you would soon reach a very different institution, the headquarters of Her Majesty's Board of Admiralty. With its exquisite 18th-Century boardroom above the courtyard, its ancient traditions of victory and insouciance, its flair for the showy and the eccentric, its marvellous uniforms and its highly individual officers, the controlling body of the Royal Navy, easily the biggest of fleets, enjoyed a prestige altogether unique. The British were intensely proud of the Royal Navy: the world feared, admired and copied it; and there was to those elegant premises, behind the Tuscan columns of Robert Adam's Admiralty Screen, an air of unshakable and aristocratic assurance.

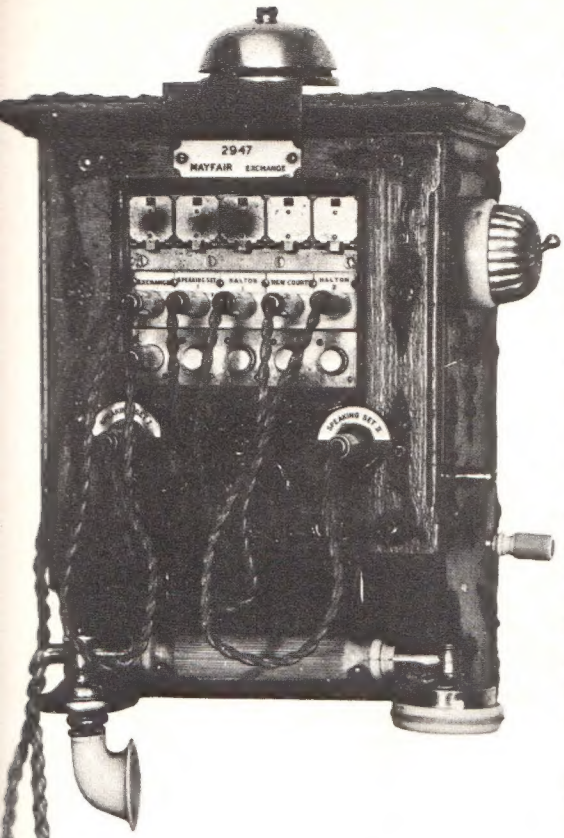
Often one would see, striding between these several offices of state, tanned or pallid men of Empire, dressed in clothes a little out of fashion and carrying around them, like a nimbus, a lofty suggestion of far responsibility.

London was the fulcrum of Empire, allegorically situated, if one consulted the right map projection, at the centre of civilization. All roads led to the New Rome. Here were the offices of the cable companies, whose lines had woven a web round the Empire – lines across the Atlantic, down both coasts of Africa, to India, Singapore and Hong Kong, boldly across the Australian outback, tentatively (and unprofitably) to minuscule outposts of Empire like the Cocos or St. Vincent. Here too were the headquarters of the imperial shipping companies – Peninsular and Oriental, Orient Royal Mail, Castle Mail Packets, British India Steam Navigation Company: firms so dominating the world's sea traffic that of all the shipping passing through the Suez Canal in the 1890s, three-quarters was British.

To the east, within the mystic square mile of the City of London, was the financial clearing-house of Empire. Clustered round the Bank of England, in a rich maze of medieval lanes and cobbled courts, were the private banks and investment companies which each year provided the £2,000,000,000 worth of capital for world-wide enterprise. About half of this went to the Empire. Railways in India, copra plantations in the Caribbean, iron-mines in Australia, gold-mines in South Africa, depended upon their skills; and through their accounts passed in turn much of the profit of the overseas Empire, to be transmuted into family wealth, distributed in dividends, or reinvested elsewhere. The economy of Empire was built upon the resources of these modestly opulent premises, along whose corridors the bank messengers hurried in their tall hats and frock-coats, and the omniscient financiers – Rothschild, Baring or Coutts – moved from boardroom to boardroom to discuss the future of Sarawak, the mineral resources of British Columbia, or whether or not Mr. Rhodes should be encouraged in his campaign against the Matabele.

Sundry other establishments, monuments or mere memories reminded the citizen of London that his was the capital of a quarter of the world. There were foundations like the Royal Colonial Institute, the Imperial Institute, or the Ladies' Imperial Club. There were the offices of the Colonial Agents, the travel specialists ("Portmanteaux Shipped Direct to Bombay"); the colonial wine

Little reminders of Empire, like patriotic postcards (left) and advertisements (right), were an everyday part of life for Londoners in the 1890s. Uncritically portraying the Empire as an institution founded on freedom, truth and equality, and bound by threads of sentiment and commerce, they helped create the consciousness of living in a great imperial capital.



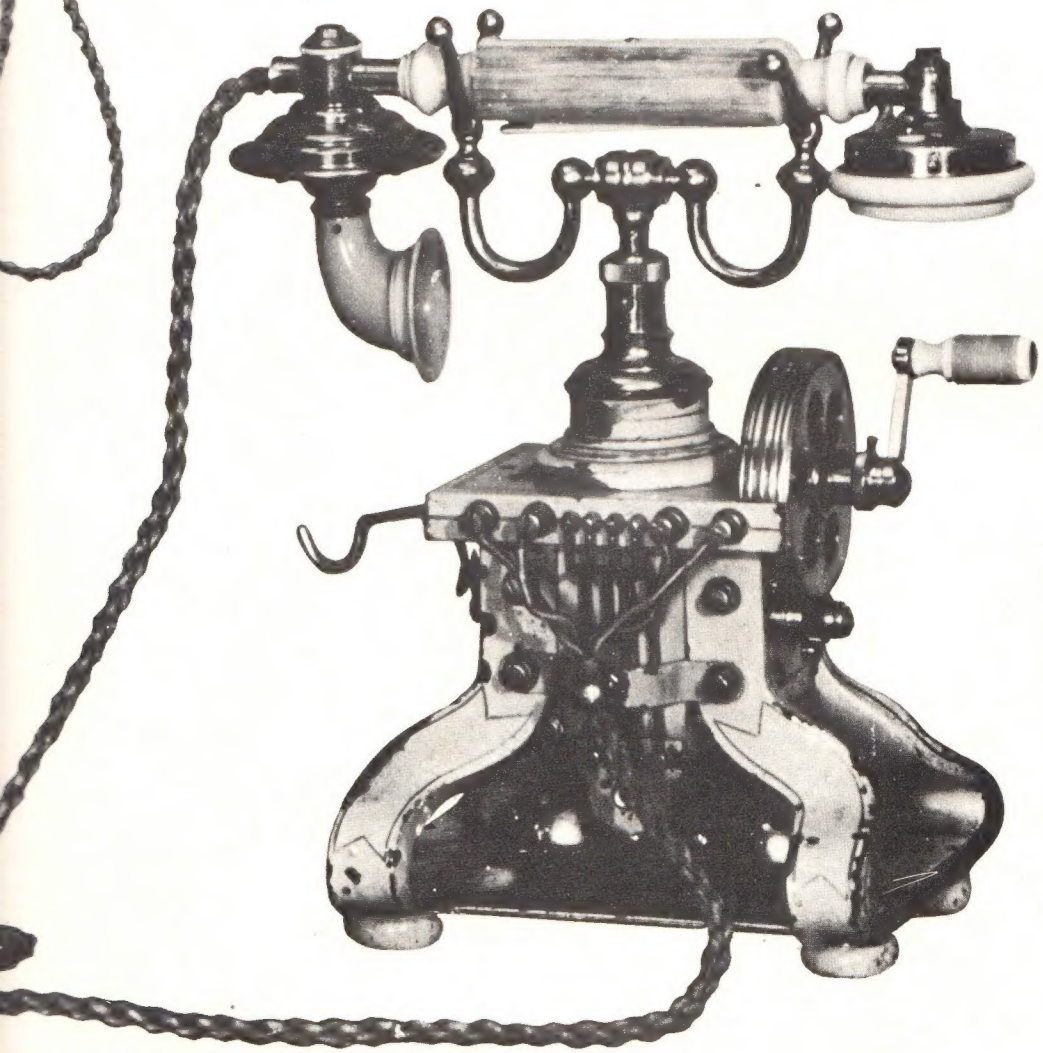
The magneto telephone (below), together with its switchboard (left), were soon to improve London's imperial communications.

merchants ("Manager, Lieut.-Colonel Haskett-Smith, Late of the Cameron Highlanders"); the shops selling tropical medicines, Camp Beds for Colonial Climes, mosquito nets, patent field cookers, leather-bound trunks, the Shikaree Trop-cal Hat or the Jungra Shooting Suit ("impervious to spear grass").

There were statues, here and there across the grimy old city, to viceroys and imperial conquerors. Richard Burton, the African explorer, slept beneath his marble Arab tent in the Catholic cemetery at Mortlake. In the nave of Westminster Abbey lay the incomparable Livingstone, his body brought out of Africa by his devoted Negro servants, Susi and Chuma.

Sometimes the Londoner might catch a glimpse of living imperial functionaries. He might, for instance, observe the Judges of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the ultimate tribunal of the British Empire, assembling in their dowdy Whitehall premises to discuss a tribal dispute from Malaya, a tort from Manitoba or a case concerning the disposal of temple properties in the Punjab. He might see the Speaker of the House of Commons, an assembly whose writ ran in one degree or another throughout the British possessions, and whose approval was theoretically required for every stutter of a Maxim gun. He might see the 95th Archbishop of Canterbury, head of a Church whose 96 bishoprics spanned the entire Empire, emerging in splendid canonicals from his official home at Lambeth Palace.

Or he might set eyes on the Queen of England. She often came to London from her castle at Windsor, and her carriage might be seen on its way from the railway station to Buckingham Palace, or clattering through the palace gates between her saluting guardsmen. By the end of her reign, though her political power was oblique rather than direct, she remained the most significant person in the land. Her presence exemplified all that the Empire meant to the British nation – beyond politics, beyond gunboats, beyond even the deliberations of those financiers up the road in the City. She was Victoria the Good, the Great White Queen, the Raj personified. One did not analyse the attributes of such an emblem. Victoria existed, she was beyond normal judgements, she was the best.



At the moment of Victoria's accession, in 1837, Britain had found herself in a position of unprecedented opportunity. She was at that time the only industrial power, having mastered the use of steam before any other. She was the financial and commercial exchange of the world. Since Trafalgar she had enjoyed undisputed command of the sea. Since Waterloo she had been immune to threats by land. She possessed an incalculable economic potential in her Indian territories and her undeveloped colonies elsewhere. She was stable enough to ride out social unrest at home, vigorous enough to absorb all manner of technical and political change.

The chances thus offered were eagerly and often ruthlessly grasped, overseas as

The "cooking lamp" was advertised as indispensable to Victorian globe-trotters.

at home. Industrialists needed raw materials. Merchants wanted safe new markets. Strategists coveted new strongpoints. Evangelists wanted freedom to apostolize the heathen and frustrate the slave-traders. Towards the end of the Victorian era all these energies and emotions, inflamed by success, seized the imagination of the people: as the Empire dizzily expanded, as education spread at home, so the British responded ever more fervently to imperial stimulants.

By 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, jingoism was rampant, and a robustly Conservative government was in power. After 60 remarkable years of Victoria's reign, Great Britain consciously and deliberately reached a historical zenith. For the first and perhaps the last time in British history, the nation as a whole was inspired by the vision of Empire – the expansion of British wealth, power and judgement throughout the world. In 1897 nearly a quarter of the earth's surface was British, and a quarter of its population was subject to the Crown: Victoria's Jubilee was celebrated as a thanksgiving for imperial success, and a proclamation of imperial intentions. London, as the stage for the processions and pageants, became conscious as never before of its position at the centre of the vastest Empire in history. To the people of the capital, almost bemused by all the glitter and pomp, it seemed as if the Empire, like Queen Victoria herself, existed, that it was less contrived or conquered than providentially decreed.

The latest typewriter revolutionized clerical work at Joseph Chamberlain's forward-looking Colonial Office.

Though the Strand on a week-day was packed with horse-drawn buses plastered with advertisements, in 1890 their time was almost up: elsewhere in London electric trams were already doing a thriving business.

THE HUB OF EMPIRE

With 4,500,000 inhabitants, Late Victorian London nearly equalled the entire population of Canada, then some 4,800,000. Bursting with vitality, it was the centre for the whole elaborate structure of imperial trade, communication and administration. Its busy thoroughfares, like the Strand at Charing Cross (left), overflowed with brewers' drays and horse-buses, private broughams and victorias, cabs and pedestrians. As Dr. Samuel Johnson said a century earlier: "The full tide of human existence is at Charing Cross."

But to those who looked beneath the hubbub, it was also a city of contrasts: a short walk took the visitor from the luxury of West End residences and the comfortable security of city finance houses to the unrelieved squalor of the East End slums. London was as much "two nations" – in Disraeli's phrase – as Britain itself, and few Londoners crossed the border between the two.

A photographer snaps street portraits.

Seats of Power

The public buildings of the well-established institutions – government, finance, the Church, the law – amply expressed Victorian power and prestige in a wide variety of imposing styles, derived from classic models.

Bankers and military men, merchants and government officials worked behind mock-Classical or pseudo-Gothic façades; most of these were solid and sober mid-century structures; within a few years, however, the craze for pretentious decoration and cheap new materials produced a spate of overpoweringly ornate railway stations, hotels and mansions many of which still stand.

The importance of one increasingly powerful institution – the popular Press – was less obvious to an outsider. A stroll through the centre of the newspaper world revealed no hint of its real power. Alfred Harmsworth had founded his half-penny *Daily Mail*, with its sensationalist appeal to the newly literate masses, only in 1896. Fleet Street's densely packed houses were as yet unbroken by the imposing Press buildings which were soon to dominate this ancient thoroughfare.

The Royal Exchange Assurance Company building in the City was built in the safe, uncontroversial Classical style of much Early Victorian architecture.

Fleet Street in 1897 was already the home of many newspapers. According to one enthusiastic reporter, the buzz of telegraph and telephone messages were making this street "the very cradle of the world."

The Houses of Parliament, a masterpiece of restrained Victorian Gothic architecture, furnish an appropriate backdrop for the superimposed photograph of an elegant gentleman having his boots polished.

GOODWILL
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Business of the Streets

London's crowded streets provided a small-time living for thousands. Pedlars, hawkers and itinerant traders lined the cobble-stoned streets with their barrows, and sold hot and cold drinks, sandwiches, cutlery, boiled eggs, furniture, cockles, clothing and live chickens.

It was an insecure competitive life, "like holding yourself up after a shipwreck first by one floating spar then by another," in the maelstrom of London's unplanned sprawl of buildings. Many never even attempted the struggle to earn an honest living: a host of pickpockets, thieves and confidence tricksters preyed upon those who looked respectable or prosperous enough to be carrying a sovereign or two.

Only at night did the hubbub decline: then the streets were left all but deserted, and the best-established street-traders of all – the 80,000 prostitutes – could ply this oldest of the professions in the fitful, flickering light of the gaslamps.

A delivery boy downs a glass of fizzy Sherbert's Water, on sale for a ha'penny.

Firemen were a familiar sight, for the 800 men of London's Fire Brigade – at that time the largest in the world – were called upon to fight an average of 30 fires daily.

The soup house, where a sustaining meal could be purchased for twopence, was usually patronized by the down-and-out. This one in Drury Lane let rooms to ex-convicts.

"Knives to grind!" was the familiar cry of the cutlers, many of whom worked near the Smithfield meat market sharpening the knives that the butchers used.

Market of the World

Throughout the 19th Century, London was the main clearing-house of Britain and the market-place for produce from all over the world. Railways rushed fruit, vegetables, fish and meat to the markets at Covent Garden, Billingsgate and Smithfield. Ships from Empire and elsewhere unloaded cartons, crates and bales at the wharves along the Thames. On this flow of goods a million or more workers depended for their livelihood.

It was a precarious existence. The great age of commercial expansion was over, and unemployment was a recurring threat to London's casual, day-to-day labourers. Strikes and lockouts were common, and labour unrest had several times led to violence. Bloody Sunday – November 13, 1887, when soldiers had battled with unemployed rioters in Trafalgar Square – still rankled in working-class memories.

Flower-girls with their baskets of posies were a familiar sight in London streets.

Tower Bridge, a triumph of Victorian engineering, opens its roadway to let a ship pass.

Porters at Covent Garden – the centre of the fruit and vegetable trade – pose for the photographer while the women workers busily shell baskets of walnuts.

The warehouses of London's docks could store over 200,000 tons of goods and were the biggest in the world. "Nothing," commented Baedeker's guide-book, "will convey to the stranger a better idea of the vast activity and stupendous wealth of London than a visit to the docks."

How the Other Half Lived

Of those who inhabited this, the world's richest city, 30 per cent lived in hopeless poverty. At that time few knew of the violent contrast between rich and poor: the poverty-stricken inhabitants of the eastern districts knew nothing of the western areas "but from hearsay and report," and for the wealthy the districts in the east where "the other half" lived were as "unexplored as Timbuctoo," according to a building society's report. In the 1890s, the problem was at least recognized. The East End was seen as "an evil plexus." A Fijian or a Maori, said one writer, was "not half so savage as the tenant of a tenement in an East London slum." And, as Will Crooks, a workhouse-educated Labour M.P., ironically put it: "The same sun which never set on the Empire never rose on the dark alleys of East London."

A single room like this, which often served a whole family as "kitchen and parlour and bedroom and all," reflected the general overcrowding and squalor of working-class housing.

Dressed in tattered rags, the most destitute of London's citizens lived in the streets, using public benches as their household furniture.

The children of the poor seldom left the vicinity of their slum dwellings, and played and amused themselves – sometimes begging from passers-by – in the dingy back streets.

II. The Cracked Facade

Within a month of the Jubilee celebrations, even before the last buntings had been removed, a disturbing poem was published in *The Times* of London, traditionally the organ of the British ruling classes, and in 1897 as hotly imperialist as the most sensational of its penny contemporaries. It was by Rudyard Kipling, at 32 the acknowledged laureate of the imperial idea. Kipling more than anyone had succeeded in equating Empire with duty, honour, national pride and opportunity: and as the adulated author of *East is East, Gunga Din, The English Flag* and *Ave Imperatrix!* might have been expected to crown the triumph of Jubilee with some culminating paean.

This, though, is what *The Times* published that morning of July 17:

God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine –
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

The tumult and the shouting dies;
The Captains and the Kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

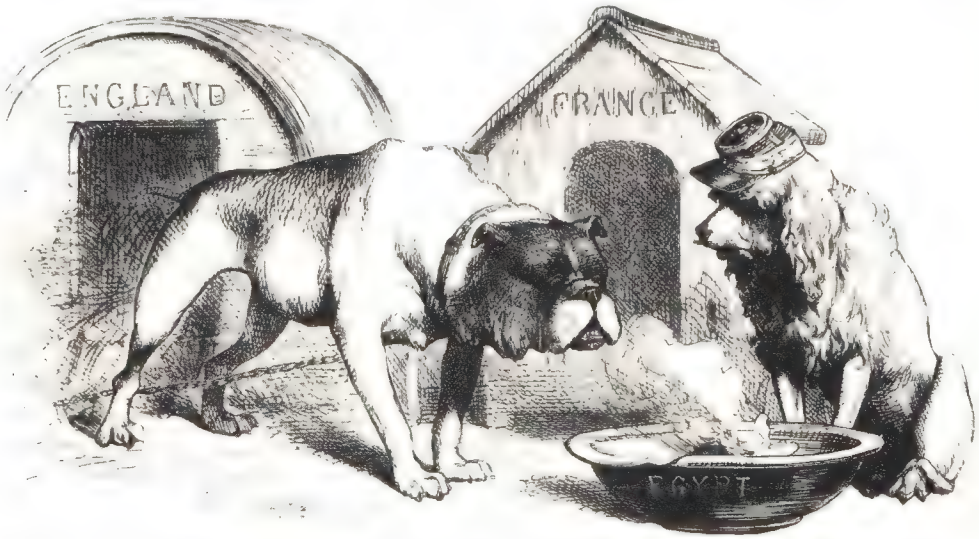
Far-called our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law –
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
For frantic boast and foolish word –
Thy mercy on Thy people, Lord!

This noble poem, *Recessional*, referred at one level directly to the Jubilee itself. The visiting captains of the colonial forces were at that moment returning to their stations, the vast fleet assembled for the Spithead Review was dispersed to its separate squadrons. Only the ashes were left of the beacons which, on dune and headland across Britain, had blazed the meaning of Jubilee.

But in a deeper sense Kipling had in mind the profounder act of sacrament which was Empire itself – the ritual imposition of British values, like a laying on of hands, upon so many alien races, speaking so many different tongues and honouring such diverse religions. *Recessional* was a warning against the degrada-



A cartoon reveals British fears that France might seize control of the Egypt-to-India route.

Rudyard Kipling, the high priest of Empire, unexpectedly prophesied its doom in his famous Jubilee poem of 1897, "Recessional."

tion of this ethic. It was a reproof to a newly bombastic people. It hinted at unresolved doubts about the moral nature of imperialism. And it disconcertingly suggested that British supremacy in the world was not so inevitable, not so divinely ordained as it seemed.

For as Kipling sensed in premonition, the imperial glory was skin-deep. It was a veneer. The craze for Empire was newborn, and would be short-lived: London was really far more an island capital than an imperial capital. Those statues of Empire worthies, though they had assumed a transient prominence in 1897, were rightly overshadowed by memorials to all the statesmen, artists, scientists and men of war who had, during a thousand years of history, given this kingdom a more durable greatness. The frenzy of those super-imperialist jingos was camouflage for an underlying insecurity. The power of the British Empire was partly illusion, and the disarming grandiloquence of the Diamond Jubilee, so sentimental, so brassy, disguised a growing sense of unease.

"CAUSE AND EFFECT:

RUSSIA ADVANCING UPON AFGHANISTAN, ENGLAND RETIRING FROM IT."

This Russian cartoon, reprinted in Britain, seemed ample proof of Russian designs on India.

The exuberance of Empire was genuine enough, and much of the self-adulation was deserved: but the truth was that London, Hub of the Universe, was already passing the peak of its supremacy. Some of the very soldiers who lined the Queen's route on Jubilee Day, and many of the children who skipped and sang in the streets in celebration of Empire, would live to see the dismantling of the whole imperial edifice, like a stage-set when the play is over.

Economists knew that the industrial momentum of British progress, the basis of imperial expansion, was already slackening. Other powers were catching up. Germany and the United States were already greater producers of steel. France, Italy, Japan and Russia were industrial powers too, and Britain no longer set the pace in invention, production techniques or distribution. The fiery salesmanship of earlier times had decayed into complacency: "the usual story", reported a Foreign Correspondent of the 1890s, home from the Far East, "foreigners content with smaller profits, excessive rates of interest charged by English agents, inelastic terms of credit, incompetent travellers." In absolute terms Britain was still the greatest of foreign traders: but her rate of growth was less than others', and her dynamism was perceptibly fading.

Diplomatically, too, the old command had weakened. The "splendid isolation" that had gone into the language was not really so splendid. Britain, the most consistent of the great nations, was threatened by the rising force of more volatile and restless powers. The United States was recognizably the super-power of the future. Commercially the Americans were already challenging the British in markets everywhere: politically Britain and the U.S.A. repeatedly clashed, notably over interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine, by which the U.S.A. claimed the right to protect all independent states of the Americas from foreign intervention. London was always careful, however, not to press the majesty of the Pax Britannica so resolutely as to go to war with her former colony. France, too, as the only other major colonial power, was often at odds with Britain over frontiers or spheres of influence: even as the Jubilee celebrations proceeded Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand of the French Army was laboriously paddling and tramping his way across Equatorial Africa to establish French power on the Upper Nile. His confrontation with Kitchener at Fashoda the following year almost led to war. France had a technically progressive navy, and so persistent were the old antipathies between Wellington's people and Napoleon's that in Malta the British were building a hefty new defence line specifically to keep out the French. The threat from Russia was more legendary than real, but the fear of a Russian invasion of India was an old perennial of British strategy – as the Tsar once said, all he had to do to paralyse British policy was to send a telegram mobilizing his forces in Turkestan. It was a supposed Russian design upon the Dardanelles, back in the 1870s, that had given a name to jingoism in the first place:

We don't want to fight, but, by jingo if we do,
We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too.
We've fought the Bear before, and while Britons shall be true,
The Russians shall not have Constantinople.

But in 1897 the most real threat was from Germany – cock-a-hoop, ambitious, presided over by Victoria's flashy and unpredictable grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm.

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MAKE-BELIEVE

The Duke (later King George V) and Duchess of York recall an earlier imperial glory in Elizabethan attire.

One of the highlights of London's social season in 1897 was the fancy-dress ball given in Devonshire House. It was a brilliant occasion on which the future George V and his wife joined their aristocratic friends and relatives, some of whom are seen here, in donning the dress of their favourite historical characters. "The cardinals and doges walked in superb majesty," reported *The Graphic*, "the knights in armour glistened in silken mantles and diamond decorations."

Few guests at that glittering party could have doubted the strength of the landed aristocracy. In a century containing three Parliamentary Reform Acts, measures that progressively reduced landowners' power, they still wore the mantle of the ruling class. But the real location of power in an industrial nation, till now obscured by the fact that wealthy industrialists had joined the aristocracy, could not for long be ignored. Only two decades ahead, the mantle of power worn with such assurance at Devonshire House would finally be packed away.

Mrs Asquith
as an Oriental Snake Charmer

IN MAYFAIR

H. R. H. [illegible]

Mademoiselle Henriette de Courcel
as a Valkyrie.

Mr. Arthur Sassoon
as Chief of the Janissaries

Lady [illegible] Churchill
[illegible]

H. R. H. The Hereditary Prince of Saxe Coburg
as Duke Robert of Normandy. A.D. 1060.

H. H. Princess Henry of Pless
as Cleopatra.

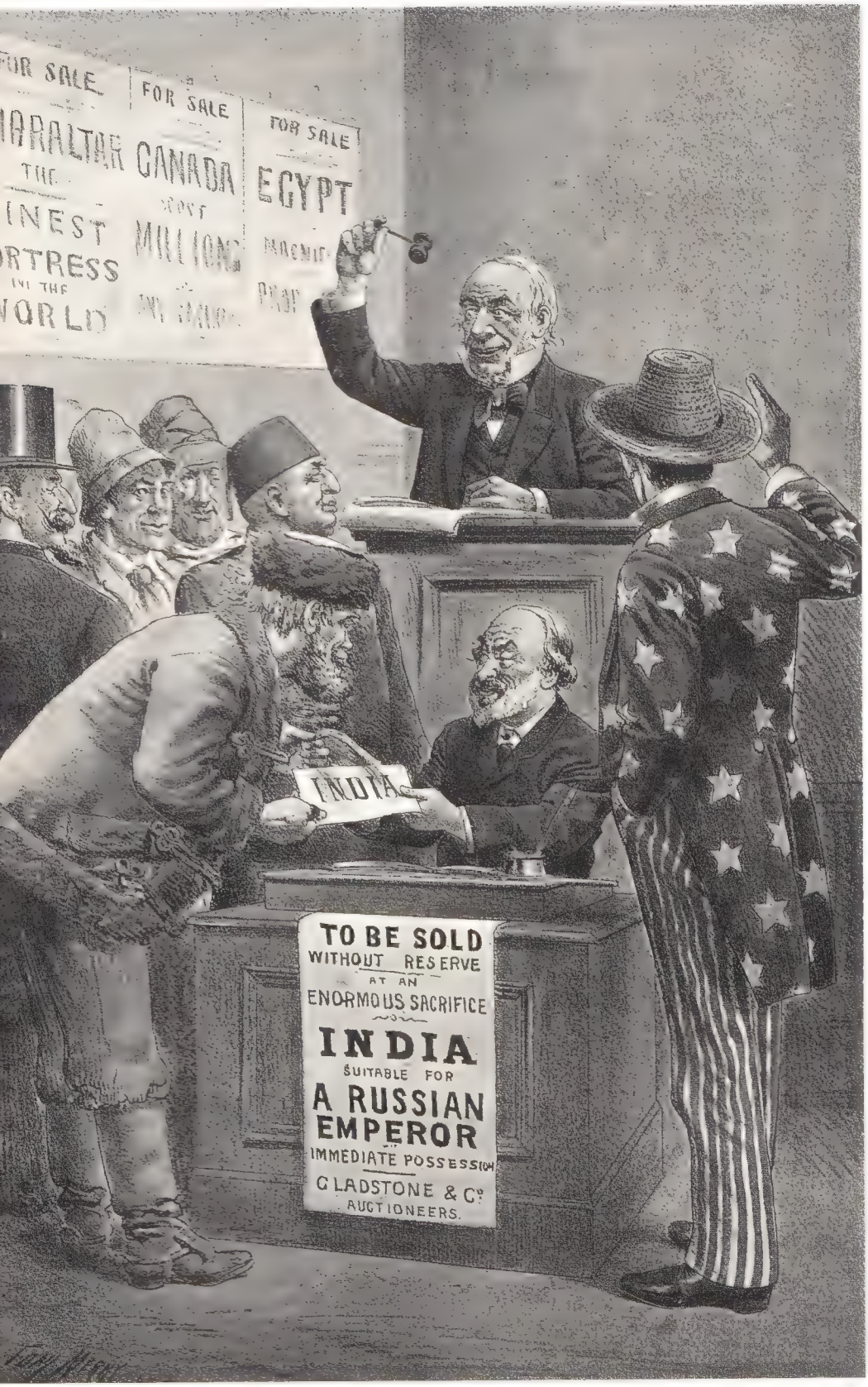
The Navy bellows to Britannia to warn her about the menacing fleets and big guns of France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and America.

The Germans were frank challengers. They had started an empire of their own, in direct imitation of the British. Though Lord Salisbury had achieved a peaceful division of spoils between the two empires in Africa, even ceding the North Sea island of Heligoland (British since 1814) in return for concessions in Zanzibar, still everyone knew that the rivalry was intense and possibly perilous. The Germans were building a powerful new fleet. Their diplomacy seemed designed to exclude Britain from the affairs of the Continent. Their industry, already in some respects more advanced than the British, was expanding faster from more modern beginnings.

British foreign policy had traditionally been based upon two fundamentals: a fleet more powerful than the combination of any two potential enemy navies, and a balance of power in Europe to prevent the emergence of a single super-state across the Channel. The rise of Germany put both these principles at risk. The Germans were clearly bent upon the hegemony of Europe; and the Royal Navy, though numerically unchallenged, was hardly Nelson's incomparable fleet of old. Its traditions, though fun, were often fossilized. Its personnel was riddled with enervating social prejudice. Its ships were often out of date or ill-designed. Its gunnery was pathetic, officers paying far more attention to polished brasswork and impeccable paint than to target-practice or manœuvre. There was no naval staff, and no over-all war plan. As an instrument of imperial parade – showing the flag, over-aweing barbarians, relieving earthquake disasters or patrolling the sea-lanes – the Royal Navy was still superb. As a weapon of national policy it was considerably less formidable than it seemed.

The ebullient Diamond Jubilee celebrations, which had turned London into an exhibition of imperial grandeur, were partly intended to mask these weaknesses. Superficially Britain seemed supremely sure of herself: but thoughtful Britons, like Kipling, were already half-conscious of the cracks behind the facade, and haunted by visions of their country as a second-class power of the future. More significantly still, a small minority of citizens was already beginning to wonder if Empire was such a good thing after all.

By the general public, the common sense of the imperial idea, like its morality, was usually unquestioned. It was assumed that the Empire was the basis of British power and prosperity, and most people though that the nation had a perfect right to acquire undeveloped overseas possessions – even a duty. A few seers, however, thought otherwise. Some



Gladstone auctions off the Empire – India to Russia, other parts to America – in a cartoon that reflects popular imperialism by lampooning Gladstone's dislike of "forward" policies.

economists doubted if the expansion of the Empire really benefited the British economically: capital invested overseas, they argued, could better be used to improve conditions at home. Some strategists, disturbed by the dispersion of British power across the seas and continents, believed that Empire was a source of weakness rather than strength: Britain's real enemies, bristling with modern warships and well-drilled conscript armies, were marshalled close at home, not waving assegais in Zululand or exploding flintlocks on the Khyber Pass. Some people were repelled by the aesthetics of Empire – its bluster, its sanctimony, its coarse self-satisfaction.

And there were a few visionaries, even at that arrogant time, who wondered whether Empire was really *right*. Was it right, for instance, that a kingdom dedicated to the ideal of personal freedom should rule its dependencies as absolute autocracies? Was it right to impose Western culture upon peoples with ancient civilizations of their own? Were the coloured races of the Empire getting their fair share of progress, or were they merely being exploited? Was the bullying of Empire justifiable, was its inevitable militarism worthy of England? Was it all, to use a favourite value-judgement of Victorian England, fair?

The theorists of Empire were tortured by the contradictions of it all, and their principal difficulty was the dual standard of Empire: one standard for Britons, one for the rest. The glory of England lay in her free institutions, now extended so successfully to her white colonies: but the whole coloured Empire was governed as a benevolent despotism.

The British could flatter themselves that they were guiding a score of less-advanced nations towards democratic independence. Realists knew that this was a meretricious picture.

These were debilitating self-doubts, rare though they were, and confined to fastidious moralists and radicals. They were a portent of declining conviction.

When the Queen's Jubilee procession passed the Parliamentary stands at Westminster, to the boisterous greetings of the House of Commons, one slab of seats was seen to be ostentatiously empty. These were the places reserved for the

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The Naughty Nineties

The 1890s were golden years of entertainment. Workers crowded into London pubs to see "*poses plastiques*," created by apparently naked girls clad only in sheer body stockings. Packed into music-halls like the Alhambra and the Empire, boisterous audiences responded with glee to the bawdy songs and *risqué* jokes of Marie Lloyd and Vesta Tilley. Stuffier members of the middle classes murmured their disapproval of the "wanton display of the female form divine." But the tide could not be turned. As Winston Churchill asserted in his first letter to a newspaper, "In England we have too long obeyed the voice of the prude."

Vesta Tilley, in attire that accentuated her figure, sang her way to fame.

Marie Lloyd earned a world-wide reputation as a pantomime artist at the Drury Lane Theatre.

The study (above) of a young woman with a water jug was entitled "Victorian Taste."

Carefully-produced, still life poses (below) were designed to titillate.

Glamorous showgirls won personal popularity as the pin-up craze caught on.

At some music halls, a girl (left) might pose behind a frame as a "living picture."

Irish Members – who had, since the formal union of their country with England in 1800, incongruously represented their constituents at Westminster, where they spent most of their time arguing for Irish independence and making themselves the curse of each successive government.

The nearest dependency of Britain, was also the most fractious. It so happened that 1897 was a quiet time in Ireland, between storms, but even so the temper of the people was ominously unreliable. In that green and impoverished sister isle, so near and yet so foreign, there smouldered the passion of nationalism which was to ignite half the world in the next century.

The Diamond Jubilee was marked in Dublin by riots, mock funerals, looted shops and fused illuminations. A black flag flew at half-mast above City Hall, and the celebrated nationalist agitator Miss Maude Gonne, herself the daughter of an English Colonel, cried from her rostrum in Phoenix Park that the Irish would never get justice from Britain until they were able to wrench it from her "in some hour of danger or defeat, which pray God may come soon."

All over Ireland the patriots were brooding. For them, Empire had never been acceptable and must soon be ended. Every sort of public and private society, literary, artistic, sporting or social, campaigned for freedom, and in the mountains of the south armed young militants trained secretly through the summer nights. The ultimate threat to imperial supremacy – the threat of rebellion – was suggested more clearly in Ireland than anywhere, and sure enough in the end the Irish would be the first to seize their independence by force. Patriotic Irishmen saw liberty and imperialism as incompatibles: a favourite slogan of Irish nationalism was "Live Ireland – Perish the Empire!"

There were other potentially subversive nations, too, among the subject peoples of the Empire. In Canada the introspective French-Canadians of Quebec had been forcibly incorporated into the Empire by Wolfe's victory in 1759, and were now federated with the English-speaking community in the

COMMEMORATIVE PLATES had an irresistible fascination for patriotic middle-class Victorians, who venerated a vast pantheon of national heroes and loved to recall the stirring events of the day. There were cheap, sturdy plates for every taste and every occasion – plates commemorating jubilees, plates for Liberals, plates for Tories, plates recalling imperial conquest, and plates emblazoned with the Queen.

Kitchener as commander of the Egyptian Army

Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone

Diamond Jubilee plate listing British possessions

A youthful Victoria on a Golden Jubilee plate of 1887

The patriarchal Queen set in an elaborate rose pattern, 1887

Plate commemorating Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897

Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli

Dominion of Canada. The English and Scots in Canada, who thought of themselves as British, called their French neighbours simply "Canadians." This name, cherished by the French, in British usage seemed to imply some indigenous swamp or forest origin.

The French-Canadians, too, considered themselves a nation apart, survivors of pre-Revolutionary French civilization in the country they still liked to call Nouvelle France. They were Catholics of a peculiarly intense persuasion, simple, superstitious, mostly illiterate, speaking their own archaic patois and doing for the most part what their priests instructed. In the 1890s their discontents were mostly incoherent or suppressed and they dreamed ineffectively of the day when they would once more be their own masters, or even of some distant time when their own high birth-rate would turn the tables after all, and make them dominant in all Canada.

"Pushful Joe" Chamberlain, with his monocle and orchid button-hole, became the hero of those who supported his advocacy of a positive imperialism.

In South Africa a rather similar people were the Boers: primitive Calvinists in religion, ethnically descendants of Dutch, Huguenot and German emigrants and so long away from Europe that they had developed habits and values altogether their own. The Boer nation was essentially a tribe of white Africans, and it chafed against the sophisticated interference of London's civil servants.

Like the Irish and the Quebecois, the Boers felt they were victimized by the British. Wherever they wandered over the high veld of South Africa, the redcoats, missionaries and administrators were sure to follow, to corrupt the Boers' biblical folk-ways, molly-coddle their black retainers, exploit their resources and ultimately shatter their independence. Many Boers lived within British South Africa: others inhabited two more or less independent republics of the interior, Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Most had been forced, by the pressure of imperial expansion, into a front of resentful nationalism, and were only biding their time to humiliate the British in return.

Among most of the coloured peoples nationalism was either bludgeoned into impotence, or had not yet been aroused. The stalwart Zulu nation, which had inflicted the terrible defeat of Isandhlwana upon the British Army in 1879, had been reduced to vassaldom at last. The Ashanti of West Africa, though they still treasured the skull of a former British High Commissioner, were temporarily subdued. The Canadian Indians were quiescent. The Maoris were co-operative. All the tributary monarchs of Empire, the sultans and nizams and rajahs and paramount chieftains and hereditary khans, had been persuaded into postures of loyal respect.

Even among those vast and docile subject nations, though, there were tremors of dissent. The British were well aware that they held this Empire together by coercion. The Indian Mutiny, in 1857, had shattered any illusions they may have had about the perpetual loyalty of grateful subjects. It had been savagely

Chamberlain's efforts to bring the self-governing

suppressed, and since then the Raj had never quite trusted its natives. The Indian Army was denied all artillery except for mountain batteries, and every Indian brigade contained a British Army battalion, just in case. Lord Roberts, when he was Commander-in-Chief in India, considered that in a foreign war only about half the Indian Army would be absolutely reliable.

The sepoys seemed content enough in 1897, but India was politically astir.

ominions under tighter British control are caricatured in this attack on his abortive attempt to become Prime Minister in the election of 1906.

Though the country was ruled despotically by the British, it enjoyed almost complete freedom of speech, and many of the vernacular newspapers were furiously critical of Empire. Religious militants preached a return to older Indian ways. Intellectual activists, especially in Bengal, argued for racial equality and demanded political opportunity.

The Indian National Congress, which had been founded – ironically, by an Englishman – as a moderate body of political commitment, was turning into a fiercely nationalist force. On the very day of the Diamond Jubilee two British officers were murdered in Poona. The British papers, in exalted mood, scarcely noticed the event, but in India it was seen as an omen – an earnest of the blood that would one day flow, when agitation gave birth to revolution. "It may be," wrote the nationalist Gopal Krishna Gokhale, "that the history of the world does not furnish an instance where a subject race has risen by agitation. If so, we shall supply that example for the first time. The history of the world has not come to and end. There are," he grimly suggested, "more chapters to be added."

Parallel texts awaited their authors in many another corner of Empire. The Sinhalese had lately been excited by Buddhist revivals of a distinctly nationalist tinge. Educated West Africans protested against discrimination in jobs and social standing. In Egypt the educated

classes were almost unanimously hostile to the British occupation, which effectively governed the country. Even the self-governing white colonies had complaints, emotionally devoted though they were to flag and mother country. The Australians resented British restraints in the Pacific, the Canadians negotiated direct with Washington, the Rhodesians did their best to evade what they called with distaste "the imperial factor." Many a hard-pressed colonist viewed with tired contempt the efforts of the Colonial Office to prove that blacks and whites were equal before Queen as before God. There was an enthusiastic movement in England for the federation of Empire, starting with economic union. Chamberlain tried to harness the emotions of Jubilee to this end. But the colonials would have none of it: they preferred to be their own economic masters, and were not ambitious to share more equably the financial burden of imperial defence. They felt themselves to be nations of their own now, at liberty to decree their own tariffs, and even pursue their own foreign policies. Such attitudes were disconcerting to the British: no imperial theorist could ever forget 1776 when British colonists of an earlier vintage had broken an earlier British empire.

Still, there was no immediate danger to the Empire of 1897. For the moment all was safe. No foreign country dared assault the British Empire yet, and no disgruntled subject peoples were yet in a position to rebel. All these several symptoms were no more than early warnings – straws in a fine fresh wind, or clouds upon an azure horizon: and of them all the most truly prophetic was the flicker of doubt that played in the minds of Britons themselves, and was given such startling expression, that summer morning in England, by Kipling's grave *Recessional*.

Such then was the zenith of the Pax Britannica: a muddled and contradictory climax, its motives tangled, its brag partly bluff, its assurance tempered by gentle hearts, its arrogance by homely sentiment. The British Empire in 1897 was tainted with vulgar opportunism and vainglory, but on the whole, as empires go through history, its intentions were not dishonourable.

A Briton surveying the Jubilee scene from the vantage-point of Queen Victoria's accession, 60 years before, would have been astonished at its scale and ostentation. That Trafalgar and Waterloo, that "near run thing," should have led to this! That the tight little island of 1837, only beginning to feel its strength, should so have flexed its muscles as to rule a quarter of the world! That the whole nation, rich or poor, gentry or pleb, should be so fired by the exotic notion of overseas dominion! That little Victoria, the virgin queen of 1837, should have matured into the ruler of the most powerful nation the world had ever seen!

For us, looking back, different emotions are evoked, and we see a poignancy to that gaudy triumph. The thick woollen uniforms look fusty, the campaign ribbons commemorate wars long forgotten or discredited, the field-marshals on their chargers look like little men dressed up to shine. Even the Queen herself, returning past the palace sentries *tired* but so *grateful*, is only a mortal old lady after all, soon to join her husband beneath the dome of his Frogmore mausoleum. We know now how insubstantial was the pageant. We can see what tragedies and disillusions are to come in the near future. The silvery note of the trumpets, echoing to us still across the generations, rings with a sweet sadness now from the lost forts and frontiers of Victoria's Empire ❧

This cruel French caricature of 1897 was a pointed reminder that the outward admiration granted to Victoria and her Empire by rival nations hid a rising tide of disrespect.

S.S. Great Britain, 1845